

From Exhibit to Exhibitionism: Recent Polynesian Presentations of “Otherness”

Nicholas Thomas

for Jim Vivieaere

Take the sea away in a bottle and it remains the sea with all its imperceptible currents and identical tides.

“Bottled Ocean” is held as water within four clear walls. A small part of the vast whole; it is an installation by a pool of artists exploring “Pacific Islandness” in New Zealand.

They are Polynesians with dual concerns; their New Zealand homes and their cultural ties to the Pacific Islands: Samoa, Tonga, Niue, and the Cooks.

With exhibitions of this sort one wonders how Pacific cultural origins and traditions can be made a source of creative possibilities rather than constraints. Some works refer to the past, or express themes of transition and current entrapments. The artists are exploring their uneasiness with their blurred identity. Conflict exists between their assumed heritage and their urban experience.

These artists have a commonality. They feel the same tidal pull from the Pacific which is their provenance. They also have a need to position themselves against and within the modern tribal art market. What they have in common is heightened by the pure sound of the PACIFIC OCEAN.

JIM VIVIEAERE, *Bottled Ocean*

This essay is concerned with an exhibition of the art of Polynesian migrants in New Zealand. The show responded to viewers’ interest in Pacific cultures, but also resisted that interest. It was not simply a public projection of cultural difference but also a meditation on cultural identity and on the audiences’ interests in exoticism and difference. It included the works of artists who announced an interest in their own otherness.

My discussion of the case entails tracing rhetoric rather than reading a text. Exhibitions are not static arrays but processes. In this case, as in most others, the process began with invitations and discussions between sponsoring bodies, a guest curator, and artists. Those negotiations moved into a more specific and practical phase as work was being drawn together and the exhibit designed. Once that was accomplished, the show was publicized, witnessed, and discussed, through opening ceremonies, reviews, and gallery talks. Because the exhibition was (and still is) a touring one, much of this took place several times. The beginnings of the project happened to coincide with the start of my own research, and conversations with the curator were followed up as the show took shape. My informal involvement led to public talks at two of the venues that aimed to make the exhibition's sophistication accessible; these received some local media coverage and one was revised for the magazine *Art New Zealand*.

THE CONTEMPORARY migrant Polynesian art movement is a new development in a country that has been transformed by a Māori political and cultural renaissance over the last twenty years. The official adoption of the idea that Māori and Pakeha (white settler) cultures possess parity in a "bicultural" nation has given Māori prestige and power unparalleled in the experiences of Native Americans or Aboriginal Australians. While the specificity of indigenous claims in Australia and North America tends to get lost in a plethora of multicultural affirmations, the more limited degree of non-British migration to New Zealand, among other factors, has made it possible for Māori to insist on the continuing salience of their status as *tāngata whenua*, people of the land, who entered into a contractual relationship with white settlers in 1840, through the Treaty of Waitangi. If the treaty was ignored or dishonored over decades of land alienation, pressure was subsequently and effectively brought to bear, during the early 1980s, to make it the basis for wide-ranging legal inquiries that led in some cases to the restitution of resources, to compensation, and to other policy measures.

Though the effectiveness of bureaucratic policies to redress dispossession and discrimination can be questioned, there is no doubt that the resolution of Māori grievances will be a central preoccupation of governments well into the next century. The issue is not merely one for activists who have successfully made politicians anxious; it is also the core of a broader cultural predicament. Filmmakers such as Jane Campion (*The*

Piano), writers, fashion designers, curators, and academics share widespread if diverse preoccupations with the relationship of white nationality to the local, legitimate, and legitimating other. Biculturalism is not a solution, but the problematic frame for diverse reformulations of identity and nationality in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Migrants from Samoa, Tonga, the Cook Islands, and Niue began to move to New Zealand’s cities, and especially Auckland, in the decades of economic growth and labor shortage after the Second World War. It might be assumed that biculturalism, which defines the nation as a Pakeha-Māori partnership, would deprive them and other migrant communities of economic and political status. While this is true of Asians, and while all migrants would seem excluded by the binary logic, the cultural affinities between other Polynesians and Māori, together with a growing if nebulous interest in New Zealand’s Pacific location, have gradually seen the Polynesian communities acknowledged. That recognition was not simply bestowed, but worked toward.

Art has been peculiarly central for the Māori renaissance. Activism over land rights and resources from the 1970s on paved the way for subsequent developments, and protests against the 1981 tour of the South African rugby team prompted new scrutiny of racism in New Zealand. However, the success of *Te Maori* in New York was seen to validate Māori art at the center of the international art world. Key features of the exhibition were the elaborate protocol and the emphasis on the pieces’ continuing sanctity. A range of *tapu*-lifting rituals accompanied the show’s opening in each venue, while the galleries were treated generally as Māori cultural spaces for the duration of the exhibition. Full Māori participation was established as the only legitimate basis on which an exhibition could proceed. Despite the archaism and apparent primitivism of the exhibition’s aesthetic, its effect in Aotearoa New Zealand was the affirmation of *contemporary* Māori, who were to find their work increasingly showcased in national institutions.

The Māori renaissance arguably provided a cultural model that Polynesian migrants could emulate. Yet it is striking that two of the most prominent Polynesian artists acknowledge that they were initially prompted to express their cultural distinctiveness through their art by white artists and art teachers. Fatu Feu’u said he was a “Sunday painter” who emulated Gauguin until the mid-1980s, when Pakeha artists such as Tony Fomison—who had long been interested in Polynesian cultures—encouraged him

to develop a style that drew on his background. Similarly, according to his secondary school art teacher, Michel Tuffery “was doing a lot of expressionist moody figures—Kirchner, Van Gogh. I remember saying one day, For God’s sake you’re a Polynesian, let it show in your work!”

Feu’u is especially interesting for his deliberate and successful invention of a contemporary pan-Polynesian art. His work features bright colors, frangipani, and masks; some motifs are derived from barkcloth patterns, as is a grid structure he has employed in many paintings and lithographs. His use of motifs from Lapita pottery is especially significant, because this is not a modern but an archaeological tradition associated with the early waves of Oceanic settlers in the Pacific. The Lapita potters are understood to be the ancestors of most island Melanesians and all Polynesians; this is therefore a shared tradition rather than one specific to Feu’u’s own Samoan culture or the particular art traditions of the Tongans or Cook Islanders. In a few paintings (preceding article, Figure 6), including an interior mural in the Aotea Centre, Auckland’s central theater and arts complex, Feu’u has also imaged a kind of national narrative for New Zealand’s Polynesians: the migrating tuna and the traditional motifs flow together past two coastal profiles—Auckland’s two harbors, where the first cohorts of Polynesians arrived by ship and the more recent by plane. Their journey is figured as an extension of the travels of their ancestors across the Pacific; Auckland, now the largest Polynesian city in the world, emerges as a new center and further point of settlement for Polynesian culture.

Feu’u has refrained from continuing to paint in this didactic fashion, though it is worth mentioning that the version of the painting illustrated here was acquired by what was then the Ministry for Pacific Islands Affairs. Many of his other paintings and screen prints have emphasized environmental themes, and, in particular, communicated concern about the overfishing of the Pacific. This kind of work, which makes an appeal on behalf of his (all our) grandchildren (“Save a fish for Damon”) rather than an assertive or angry statement, appeals broadly to mainstream environmentalist sentiment, and has been popular. Feu’u has worked very hard at disseminating his work through lithographs accessible to middle-class buyers, and T-shirts accessible to everyone; his designs have also appeared on ceramics, carpets, and stained glass; his paintings have been reproduced on postcards and a few book covers. Through all these channels, Feu’u has played a key role in giving New Zealand’s public visual culture a Pacific idiom.

Michel Tuffery, younger than Feu'u, has similarly worked successfully at printmaking, but he gained particular visibility in 1994 when commissioned to design the banners and posters for New Zealand's International Festival of the Arts, in Wellington early in the year. Though his style differs from Feu'u's, it also foregrounds Oceanic motifs and mythological allusions. Both artists produce work that speaks their identities; and cultural identity means reference to traditions and traditional motifs. Whatever the design elements once did through optically complex arrangements on tapa, they now work as emblems for the Pacific cultures of New Zealand, and for New Zealand's effort to localize a national culture through Pacific affinities. If Feu'u's work was initially unfamiliar, his audience rapidly learned how to look at it and how to see themselves through it. Those who encouraged these artists to develop Polynesian styles were speaking for wider audiences than they knew.

Welcome as commercial success has been for these and other Polynesian artists, some are concerned about the thirst for the exotic that arguably motivates mainstream interests in the Pacific and in Pacific art. Many white New Zealand artists have turned to Polynesian subject matter. Despite the diversity of their responses, those who are most successful commercially have emphasized the bright colors, the ocean, the flowers, and the bodies. This could be seen as an in-flight magazine aesthetic unconscious of its congruence with the appreciative and romanticizing tradition in European representations of Oceania; a number of artists could be said to do little more than update the wallpaper in a fresh visual idiom. Work of this kind could also be seen to inform public interest in the colorful otherness of contemporary Pacific art, and to exclude the conflict and complexity of late twentieth century life in the Pacific Islands, as well as the strange wildness and violence of Auckland's factory suburbs. This restrictiveness is a constitutive feature of the "modern tribal art market," which carries preoccupations with authenticity and exoticism over from the old tribal art market. If a few of the most successful Polynesian artists have seemed complicit in this all-too-familiar dehistoricization and spicing-up of otherness, a number of others have responded to it in a more qualified way. They have embraced the fascination with things Pacific, but insisted on defining the object of that interest in their own terms. They have also sought—perhaps without much success so far—to have their work seen for its particular content and argument, rather than for its expression of "Pacific Islandness." Although they welcomed group

exhibitions of Pacific artists in the late eighties, by 1994 the effect seemed pigeonholing rather than enabling.

I WENT TO SEE Jim Vivieaere soon after I began research in New Zealand, because I'd seen one of his collages in an earlier exhibition of Polynesian art, *Te Moemoea no Iotefa* (The Dream of Joseph), that I'd encountered during a family holiday a couple of years earlier. That show had innovatively combined traditional and contemporary work, "craft" and art, Pacific Islanders and white artists, and had provoked my initial interest and led to the wider project. Jim's collage was *6 Tahitians, 2 in Leningrad, 4 in Papeete* (preceding article, Figure 4); I presented this as an ironic comment on colonialist voyeurism in a paper I wrote about *Te Moemoea*, and published it in the same terms in my general book on *Oceanic Art*. Rather than recapitulate that discussion, I want to make it clear that the collage was not typical of Jim's oeuvre. His work has usually had an allusive and decorative rather than a didactic aesthetic; questions of identity, geography, and representation tend to be expressed indirectly if at all (Figure 1). By singling that work out I was privileging a critical statement that was immediately intelligible from the viewpoint of post-colonial theory, rather than the play of material and reference that has generally been integral to Jim's practice.

I went to talk to Jim about that work, and about his wider views concerning Polynesian art, and immediately sensed his resistance to the label and to what he took to be my inquiry. As with other artists and curators, I had initiated discussion on open terms, and not made it clear that I adopted one stance or another with respect to a question such as the desirability or otherwise of affirmations of tradition. I was, in a sense, in the process of unlearning my own prejudice in favor of overtly innovative and hybrid ways of figuring identity, and beginning to grasp the continuing dynamism and practical salience of traditionalism, especially for many Māori. Oddly enough, however, Jim's attitude seemed to match the aspect of my own that I had been endeavoring to suppress. He had recently attended a forum where questions of cultural property had been discussed, and had, on his own account, troubled some Māori by arguing that he had no special relationship to traditional Cook Islands art. Barkcloth, he had suggested, was simply one of a range of materials he might draw on; but he felt he had no particular right to use it that *palagi* artists lacked, and no more special a bond with it than with other

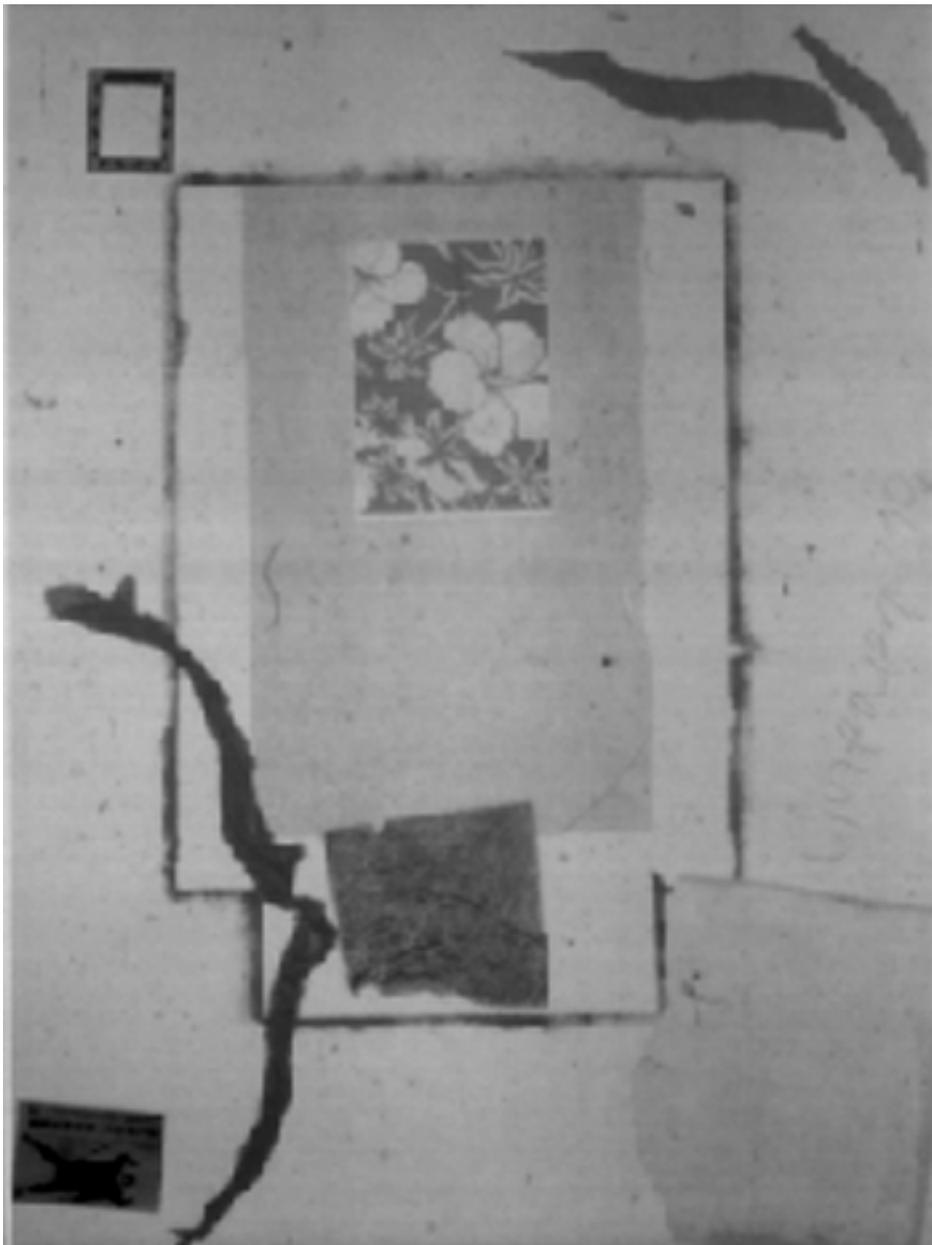


FIGURE 1. Jim Vivieaere, *Message from the East, Going South*, 1990. Collage, 1040 x 1355 mm. (Collection of Rangihiroa and Adrienne Panoho)

visual sources, such as architectural motifs observed during European travel.

At the time we talked—in view of the dormant harbor volcano of Rangitoto—Jim had just been asked to curate an exhibition of contemporary Polynesian art. From the start, he seemed at once interested and cynical. His collage practice had long involved the arrangement of casually selected material, and I think a curatorial project suggested the possibility of doing the same thing on a more extensive scale. The work would be drawn together into something that was essentially an installation rather than a conventional show, in which the emphasis is on the works rather than their arrangement. While this challenge was evidently attractive, Jim also said, on this occasion and subsequently, that he felt the galleries only “wanted brown faces.” The work would be shown because they felt obliged to show it, not because it would ever be acquired or displayed on other grounds. It was window-dressing that legitimated the institution more than it advantaged the participating artists. Or perhaps “as much” rather than “more than.” Exposure in a major touring show is not to be sneezed at.

Jim would probably have agreed with an argument put forward more emphatically by Rasheed Areen, who equated the “cultural identity card” carried by many nonwestern artists with the passbooks of South African blacks. Jim’s initial impulse was to exclude the well-known and emerging Polynesian artists such as Feu’u, Tuffery, and John Pule, because their work—which paraded cultural identity without apology—was what the sponsoring bodies expected and wanted. As it turned out, however, the exhibition did not in the end pursue the “fight” that Areen recommended through any such categorical exclusions, but manipulated those expectations in a more subtle way.

At the time of that first meeting, I don’t think I conveyed to Jim quite how sympathetic I was to his understanding of the antinomies of the situation. In fact I was excited and delighted by his caprice, by his whimsical dedication to giving the sponsors both less and more than they bargained for. But at this stage I was still finding my feet, and I felt I was supposed to be learning things rather than taking sides or making declarations. We talked for an hour or so, and it turned out that I could give him a lift back into the city. As we came off Auckland’s harbor bridge, just before I dropped him off, he asked, “Well, Nicholas, did I tell you what you needed to know?” What did I need to know? Expecting that I was after

some definitive account of contemporary Polynesian art—as were journalists who sought him out from time to time—he clearly doubted that he could deliver. And seemed not to want to deliver.

Back in Canberra a month or so later, I sent Jim a copy of the paper I’d written on *The Dream of Joseph*, which discussed the conflicting demands on diasporic artists in terms borrowed from Paul Gilroy’s essay, “It Ain’t Where You’re From, It’s Where You’re At.” From the beginning of my project on contemporary art, I aspired to do more than address an anthropological audience; I was hoping that I would have some input into debate in the New Zealand art scene, and perhaps into curatorial practice. But I was almost taken aback to hear from Jim a few weeks later, to gather that he was drawing on the paper in statements concerning the exhibition concept and rationale that were being worked up for various bodies. I suppose I felt it was too soon, that I was having an input before I really knew what I was studying.

But I think Jim was picking up on my arguments in a rather tangential way, to validate perspectives he had substantially worked out for himself. In conversation and correspondence we had talked about distinctions between the Pacific artists who did and the ones who did not—those who foregrounded traditional iconographies and references to island homes, as opposed to those preoccupied with their situations and surroundings in New Zealand. As Jim wrote to me in May 1993: “I’d attempted to take on the premise ‘it ain’t where you’re *from* it’s where . . .’ but the Museum Directors Federatⁿ want names, established Artists whose works express their identity so in a sense I’ve had to compromise. I said that I wanted to create a visual tension between those that do & those that don’t, and I’ll just concentrate on the don’ts.”

Although this angle did emerge directly from our conversation, Jim Vivieaere was also thinking through ideas of distance and screening. If the audience and the “modern tribal art market” were demanding to see, consume, and own Pacific Islandness, that impulse could be resisted and rendered problematic by placing work at some remove. If the experience of a gallery visit, or of owning work, is marked by the opportunity for close and direct inspection, by absorption in a painting that fills one’s field of vision, what happens when work is only partly visible, at some remove, or presented in some mediated form?

It subsequently made sense to read this distancing impulse back into the collage I mentioned earlier. *Six Tahitians* used representations of Poly-

nesians that were evidently voyeuristic, and drew attention to the absurd remoteness of the painting from the people notionally depicted, but suggested that a sea change was under way, in the sense that an artist could turn the tables, using Gauguin as found material, in the way that the French painter had once used found Polynesians. Moreover, this notion includes a recursiveness: it is not just that a Polynesian artist reappropriates the imagery, but that the reappropriation defines the Polynesian artist as a critical commentator. The work suggests the speaking position and the capacity to produce distance, to proffer and withhold imagery at the same time. The exhibited work did not consist of an actual piece of pandanus, but of a color xerox. Not only the people originally depicted, but also the reproduced images were placed at more than one remove. The weave of the pandanus, the tangibility of the mat or bag that is ubiquitous in quotidian life in the islands, was transformed from texture to surface, from tradition to hi-tech, from original to copy. The distance present in Gauguin's objectifying vision, which was reinforced in the geographic separation of the painting from its subject, was framed and commented on by a Polynesian who insisted on his own capacity to introduce distance between viewer and original. This was not about the pervasiveness of simulacra. It was a local argument.

Jim thought about putting the artists' works inside a tent that viewers could look into through narrow slits. Or that could be relayed by video. Or not seen at all. I think he had his own reasons for abandoning such an uncompromising resistance to the audience. If he had not, the proposal would have been opposed by gallery staff who in all likelihood would have felt it went too far. And Jim would not have found it easy to press the point, because some if not all the artists would have been upset had the arrangement detracted from the visibility of their work. In other respects, the curator's interests potentially conflicted with those of the participating artists. While the curator had an interest in parodying the conditional inclusion of Pacific art in an institution devoted to the presentation of high culture, the artists themselves were inclined to take this elevation for what it was worth. One of the artists was appalled when the idea of including clichés of Pacificness such as coconuts and bananas was raised. "I'm not having my work next to a bag of bananas," he told me indignantly.

These potential clashes were forestalled by an approach that Jim worked out on the basis of a variety of stimuli, notably including an inno-

vative installation in an exhibition in the Netherlands, where work was disposed around and in a drained swimming pool. Something to do with the way this created a pool of light and its own flows must have appealed to him and resonated with the problem of representing and containing cultural tides and currents from too many different islands in one space. An idea of containment also suggested the notion of a “display case,” and the ways in which Pacific objects had long been laid out in museum displays. To reintroduce the boxed exhibit was to suggest that the “modern tribal art market” might share a good deal with an older ethnological aesthetic.

By March 1994, the idea had developed further. In a statement of curatorial rationale produced for gallery directors and others, Jim stated

The work will be presented, Paris Salon style from floor to ceiling. To enhance this look [the guest curator] has distanced the audience by using a clear perspex wall and intends to have the floor of the enclosed exhibiting space mirrored. He is also conscious of the tableaux style that early ethnologists and anthropologists displayed Polynesian artifacts and weapons in museums and in their homes.

The implication was that this was a meta-exhibition that made modes of display as well as a body of work its subject matter.

WHAT WAS NOW called *Bottled Ocean* would open at the first venue, the City Gallery, Wellington, in May 1994. I had hoped to get there a week or so earlier to witness the work coming in and going up on the walls, but commitments in Canberra prevented me from arriving until the day before, though at that point a good deal remained to be done. The morning before the evening opening, the muralist was just beginning to paint a partition that stood across the exhibition entrance (Figure 2), the arrangement and lighting of a number of works remained to be finalized, and a range of other last-minute preparations were being made. Watching all this, using a video camera, trying to be in on things without being too much in the way, my sense of the contingent and compromised nature of an exhibition deepened. Some people were frantic; others were standing around with nothing to do; Jim was explaining the show to visitors and artists; work was being arranged and rearranged (Figures 3, 4, 5); a cluster of participating artists and hangers-on were in the gallery's cafe most of the day. At one moment Jim grabbed me. He wanted to make sure I



FIGURE 2. Patriq Futialo painting the partition across the entrance to *Bottled Ocean*. City Gallery, Wellington, May 1994. (From video by Nicholas Thomas)

heard the muralist's one-line explanation of his work: the part on the outside of the partition, that faced the viewer entering the show, referred to the Samoan Mau movement, a separatist campaign that culminated in the deportation of some of the leaders (Figure 6). I duly took note, as I tried to think through my responses: I had agreed to give a gallery lecture about the show on my next visit and already sensed a gulf between the intricacies of what I had seen going into it, and any tale I could tell.

The evening event became effervescent, after some pretty dull speeches. The Tongan string band was supposed to arrive beforehand and play for half an hour; instead they arrived after everything else and played for two hours. I was struck by the way older island ladies who looked like pillars of the church seemed thrilled by works that most people would have regarded as tough or uncompromising. One group got themselves photographed in front of Greg Semu's *Uprising!*, which consisted of posters and spray paint on corrugated iron. Afterwards most of the artists went to the gallery bar and then to somewhere else more congenially downmarket off the Cuba Street Mall. Michel Tuffery tried to teach me how to blow a small conch shell; I simply couldn't, and felt unmusical in all possible senses.



FIGURE 3 (top). Ani O'Neill and Jim Vivieaere arranging Ani's Tangaroa dolls.

FIGURE 4 (middle). Putting Michel Tuffery's *Pisupo Lua Afe* (*Corned Beef 2000*) into position on the mirrored floor behind the perspex.

FIGURE 5 (bottom). Jim Vivieaere pointing out features of the show to visitors before the opening of *Bottled Ocean*. All at City Gallery, Wellington, May 1994.

(From video by Nicholas Thomas)



FIGURE 6. Entry to *Bottled Ocean*, City Gallery, Wellington, May 1994. (Photo by Nicholas Thomas)

ETHNOGRAPHIC WORK on art scenes and museums contains an irony. Perhaps one learns a great deal about the inside of public presentations and the complications of their making, but such intimate and interested knowledges paradoxically diminish the kind of understanding that disciplines such as anthropology and cultural studies aspire toward. Their objects are public and collective rather than private or idiosyncratic. Yet once one has a sense of the plethora of personal and practical considerations that enter into an exhibition or text, one can't recover or experience the response a viewer off the street might have.

This was what I tried to do when I came back to Wellington a couple of months later. Mid-morning, the gallery was cool and quiet. The outer side of the mural I mentioned was the first thing one saw; it was austere, featuring a couple of sketched portraits of men and a slogan, "Exile left your mind impotent" (Figure 6). If one didn't know the history, the date "1929," painted similarly large, would not have made a connection with the Mau; given that the exhibition had been announced as a show of

Pacific art in New Zealand, this was easily taken as a sort of master-caption. These migrant communities were cut off from their roots and mentally or culturally emasculated.

This imputation would, however, have been instantly belied by the reverse of the work, which was richer, exuberantly figuring sculpted, but vital, Polynesian bodies (Figure 7). That ambiguity—carved but alive—could be considered definitional. Anthropomorphic sculpture operates as a hallmark of archaic culture and tribal art, especially in New Zealand, where carving was and is central to Māori art, and where art has been central to debates about culture and identity. What presence do sculpted forms have in writhing and living bodies? What presence, given that migration creates definitions around absences, dislocation, and loss?

How am I to know whether these questions would have arisen for you or for other viewers? Would you have presumed that migration was a problem, in this sense? In any event, my first impression, on entering the gallery and seeing the inside of Patriq Futialo’s work, was of anything but impotence, and the impression was sustained by the range of work, in

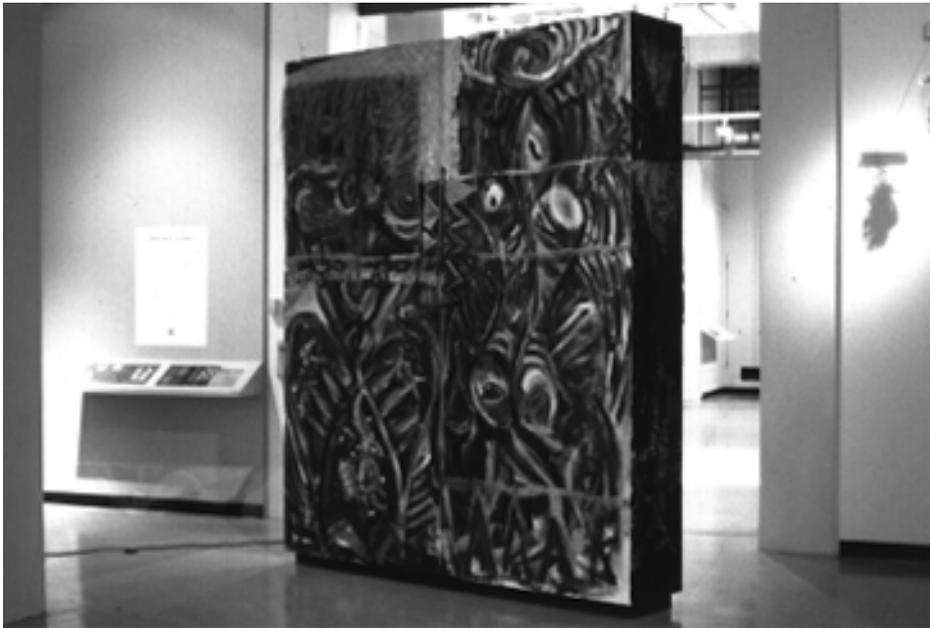


FIGURE 7. Interior side of partition painted by Patriq Futialo, City Gallery, Wellington, May 1994. (Photo by Nicholas Thomas)

video, glass, pottery, stone, printmaking, painting, and other media—that viewers turned around to discover.

The most striking feature of the exhibition is on the right. Much of the work is in a space screened off by perspex and almost harshly illuminated. It is a space very much like a display window in a department store. The paintings, prints, and objects rest on or are reflected in a brilliantly clean mirrored floor (for the Auckland installation, see Figures 8, 9). The works themselves are not captioned, but the names of the artists run past in a digital red-letter display, of the kind that conveys announcements and information bites in retail environments. Is a Polynesian art exhibition an exercise in window-dressing?

Toegamau Tom Sefo's cast glass works were outside this display case (Figure 10; though inside it in Auckland, Figure 11). Two or three of the four bowls seemed to possess no ethnic signature, and would not have seemed out of place in upmarket glass shops in Europe, North America, or Asia. One immediately resembled a Polynesian bowl—the squat legs evoked those of Samoan and Tongan kava bowls—thereby evoking indigenous sociality and tradition generally, because the hierarchical rituals and acts of ceremonial presentation that founded and reproduced those polities were enacted through kava ceremonies. Here the bowl had become a woman's product rather than a man's, and a vessel for light rather than liquid. The deftly illuminated display on a glass shelf at least a couple of feet above viewers' heads suggested both boutique presentation and the museological display of ethnographic objects. That doubleness could be seen as something less than a doubleness, because the specimen and the commodity have always had much in common. Not just because modes of display, via ethnic and functional differentiations, often parallel each other closely, but because the character of acquisitive desire is similar. Things are fetishized, above all for their novelty; the consumer or collector is turned on by foreignness and relentlessly and passionately seeks out what is distinctive and different.

Another doubleness was contrived between the substance of the glass and its artfully contrived shadow: as if the objects were in two places at once, one of which always lay beyond the shelving operations of museum collecting and consumption (Figure 12). The work of the exhibition could correspondingly be seen to be in two places at once, in the business of creating aesthetic effects, and in the critical operations that were consummately effected because they were less explicit than this essay must make them.



FIGURES 8 AND 9. Screened-off display, *Bottled Ocean*, Auckland City Art Gallery, December 1994. (Photos by John McIver, courtesy Auckland City Art Gal-



FIGURES 10, 11, and 12.
Toegamau Tom Sefo's
glass bowls, and their
shadow, in *Bottled
Ocean*, City Gallery,
Wellington, May 1994
(top and bottom); Auck-
land City Art Gallery,
December 1994
(middle). (Photos by
Nicholas Thomas)

Bottled Ocean challenged voyeuristic preoccupations with otherness, not only by subtly drawing attention to its displayed character, but also by looking back. Ani O’Neill’s rank of Tangaroa dolls confronted the viewer standing before the big perspex window in Wellington, and formed a rank along a shelf in Auckland (Figures 3, 13). Tangaroa was once a principal deity and perhaps retains spiritual importance for some Cook Islanders in the modern Christian nation. But he is familiar primarily as a national icon—appearing on coins, for instance—and as the number one Cook Islands tourist object. While the carvings in museum collections have frequently been emasculated, as they say, the big cock is restored in contemporary imagery and gives the figure the appeal of a risqué souvenir, a mildly erotic piece of airport art. This is an interesting history in itself, given that the outsiders’ eroticized construction of Oceania has generally been associated with an objectification of languid and inviting Tahitian women. If Tangaroa’s pretty exuberant masculinity strikes a discordant note, Ani O’Neill’s remaking of the artifact in fabric, and in the domestic form of a cuddly but inappropriately sexualized toy, surely exploits the ironies of tourist culture to the hilt.



FIGURE 13. Ani O’Neill’s Tangaroa dolls in Auckland, December 1994. (Photo by John McIver, courtesy Auckland City Art Gallery)

Like another of her works in *Bottled Ocean*, a pair of touristy dolls by the show's entrance titled *Tropaks*, these works could be seen to capitalize on rather than merely reject tourist trivialization. There is no outrage about the commercial exploitation of what was once a sacred art form. O'Neill, on my reading, has no stake in the reinstallation of Tangaroa as a god. Rather, the figure is reclaimed to fashion a new kind of kitsch artifact, a souvenir of an epoch in which tourism is engaged in more self-consciously. Some travel writers such as Paul Theroux, and to a lesser degree Ronald Wright, replace the search for primitive authenticities with an attitude of wry resignation before the detritus of modernity that turns up in the most unexpected places, thereby retaining a sense of first-world superiority: only "we" detect the ironies. Ani O'Neill cross-dresses the icon and reveals its entangled movements, while precluding such self-congratulatory reaffirmations of Euro-American centrality.

ACCORDING TO City Gallery evaluations, the Wellington show was popular, and was seen to attract a range of younger people who rarely otherwise visited the institution. But did they get it? According to the report, audiences "experienced some problems" with the lack of labeling; Jim had been especially concerned to credit artists only for their contribution to the whole, rather than via captions on individual works, though the City Gallery, like the Auckland City Art Gallery, circumvented his agenda by providing a leaflet that identified each work on a floor plan. The evaluation also stated bluntly that "the significance of the perspex was . . . not understood by the public and was nowhere explained."

In September 1994, I attended a meeting of gallery and museum curators in Sydney that featured a good deal of discussion around the institutional inclusion and representation of indigenous cultures. I recall being struck by the way talk of consultation with "communities" deployed a notion of "community" that had been discredited so long ago in sociology and anthropology that we'd forgotten about it. I was impressed also by an unnerving combination of much earnest talk and a pretty hard-headed push toward the formation of a professional association. As the afternoon session became more tedious and bureaucratic, Jim and I slipped out to find a drink. He talked about how he was planning a more uncompromising presentation for the Auckland installation of *Bottled Ocean*, distancing the work further, refusing to make it look pretty. I

think it was on a later occasion that he declared an interest in leaving much of the work in packing cases. “We’ll be present, but we won’t show our faces,” he was to tell me, grinning mischievously.

The curators drifted into the same bar, and Jim took off to spend some time with a Rarotongan “auntie.” In his absence, as it happened, a few of us got into a debate about *Bottled Ocean* in Wellington. Julie Ewington, on staff at Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art, was as much a fan of Jim’s as I was, and we found ourselves defending the show before a couple of fairly influential players in the New Zealand art scene. One, a director of one of the larger public regional galleries, had declined to include her institution in the show’s tour, but it was frustratingly difficult to establish precisely what her objections were. Although she suggested that the show was “unrepresentative,” she couldn’t point to artists who had been excluded; the point seemed rather to be that Jim had fashioned the assembled work too willfully into a statement of his own—as indeed he had. I only wished I had a better sense of why specifically an institution (that, like most galleries, had at times sought to associate itself with the avant garde) was not willing to go the distance with that statement. In this case, it seemed, Jim’s assumption that a Polynesian presence was being invited in primarily to legitimate the institution and satisfy the cravings of the “modern tribal art market” was not sustained: one institution, at least, did not need this kind of legitimation, or wanted a Polynesian presence of a different kind.

Jim had, to a limited degree, pursued the idea of indiscriminately filling the available exhibition space with brown faces. While a couple of the painters included might be ranked among the strongest in New Zealand on any criteria, and while many pieces were variously elegant and ebullient, a few were also embarrassingly self-conscious and displayed the process of finding roots, of self-discovery, in remarkably literal terms. But the last thing a curator presenting work of this kind can be accused of is a lack of representativeness. Tacky as it might seem, this is precisely where many young Polynesians are; it certainly exemplifies what talk of identity around art schools and in many other milieux encourages Polynesians to enunciate. Indeed, the very awkwardness of this handling of the motif draws attention to the incongruities imposed by a language of identity that privileges traditions over life experiences; I had concluded my *Dream of Joseph* paper by suggesting that despite the vitality of contemporary

Polynesian migrant culture, an essentializing aesthetic remained sovereign and might have been summed up in an inversion of the Paul Gilroy quotation: "It ain't where you're at, it's where you're from."

The issue lay behind another view put forward in the Circular Quay conversation. It was all good fun, and brilliant in its way, the speaker suggested, but could have the unintended effect of subverting the space of the contemporary. Whatever positive responses viewers had, they could only end up seeing the work as derived or acculturated products of traditions that had had earlier moments of greater strength and vitality. Such things as Cook Island appliqué quilts (*tivaevae*) would continue to count as "real" Polynesian art. I was intrigued that indigenized forms of missionary-introduced needlework, rather than more remote works of "tribal" Oceanic art, were here identified as likely bearers of authenticity—which implied in itself that "the" public, or at least the art-consuming public, had a greater capacity to extend its interests to neotraditional and nontraditional work of "others" than the speaker allowed. Nevertheless, it was a line of criticism I found difficult to respond to; I saw the logic of the point but doubted myself that many would have responded to the show in that particular way. But I hadn't conducted surveys, so I couldn't really know.

THERE WAS some tension in the lead-up to the opening of *Bottled Ocean* in Auckland. Jim, seeking to deny the institution and the audience the "prettiness" that had perhaps blunted the show's critical edge in Wellington, did not want to re-use the perspex display; understandably enough, Auckland City Art Gallery curators felt this had been the most striking element of the exhibition there, and said they had taken the show on the strength of that feature. Jim conceded on that point, but not on his interest in leaving some work packaged or partly packaged.

In this context, I must go back to Michel Tuffery's work and its treatment in Wellington. As I noted earlier, Tuffery has effectively delivered the Pacific imagery that has evidently been in demand; his prints are accessible and decorative without being static; he has deservedly gained a high profile. His work therefore represented something of a problem, from Vivieaere's point of view. A show replete with imagery of that kind would have been too close to what was wanted and expected; and even if one did not share Vivieaere's resistance to those expectations, it would obviously have been undesirable to foreground work with which the

audience was already generally very familiar. In Wellington, Jim had handled the issue by displaying the original woodblocks rather than the prints, which had been mounted in a kind of Oceanic flow across the wall, a current that connected the outside and inside of the perspex case. It was an arrangement that gave Tuffery's iconography a three-dimensional tangibility that the prints themselves could not have conveyed, that suggested the working process behind the commercial products, and presence at a different level from the rest of the work.

Tuffery had also been provoked to produce a new work in an idiom entirely different from his sculptures and prints. This was *Pisupo lua afe* (*Corned beef 2000*), a splendid bullock made of corned beef tins (Figure 4). Apart from playfully reassembling a whole from processed and packaged parts, this piece connoted the ambiguous “impact” of global trade and commoditization on Pacific Island economies. A good deal changed in the nineteenth century with colonization and the introduction of animals such as cattle that were exotic from the Polynesian point of view. More changed in the second half of the twentieth century, with deepening economic dependency: the typical Pacific diet of tinned fish or meat and rice is widely and aptly cited as a cause for worry, marking as it does declining health and diminishing self-sufficiency.

Tinned corn beef also, however, exemplifies the imported commodity that has become integral to island feasting, gift-giving, and communal sociality. It is brought back to life with meanings very different from those it possesses elsewhere, and is domesticated in a singularly local way. Although the economic problems and the growth of poverty must be faced, the bull marks the way Pacific Islanders get something from market relations that is of their own making, perhaps something beyond the vision of *palagi* too ready and anxious to discover a fading of cultures and authenticity before the corrosive forces of the market and modernity. The “2000” in the title suggested millennial fantasies and brought to mind stereotypic cargo cult practices; cult followers have frequently assembled or reassembled wealth objects or bearers of wealth in ways patently fetishistic and irrational from the perspective of Europeans. Whether viewers thought beyond the immediate witticism of this piece, I do not know; but in any event it explicitly extended the ground of Tuffery's artistic practice beyond “Polynesian culture” in the traditionalist sense.

There were two bulls, not one, in Auckland; the Wellington bull was



FIGURE 14. Michel Tuffery's *Pisupo Lua Afe (Corned Beef 2000)*, as exhibited in *Bottled Ocean* at the Auckland City Art Gallery, December 1994. (Photo by John McIver, courtesy Auckland City Art Gallery)

one of the works Jim introduced in packaged form, trussed up, a trope for the constrained appearance of Polynesian modernity in the institution (Figure 14). While it looked as awkward as was no doubt intended, a new bull (driven up from Tuffery's Wellington studio in a van just a day or two before the Auckland opening) seemed even more brilliant than its predecessor in the mirrored perspex box (Figures 8, 9). In Auckland, moreover, Michel's woodblocks were virtually the only works Jim resolutely withheld from the viewer: they were presented in a little stack, their bubble-wrap intact.

Another point of conflict with curators had been a statement Jim wanted made available as a flyer inside the gallery. The draft he gave them read:

Bottled Ocean the concept carries the limitations of a pigeon-hole, the categorisation of Brown Pacific Peoples into a single island of consciousness. For them to be represented in the City Gallery is a sort of back-hand privilege, an acknowledgement of the Polynesian communities at large, while being placed

under the scrutiny of a European mainstream art audience.

Creativity is informed by who we are and where we are at and for most Pacific Island artists much of this process is unfinished and still finding voice.

Bottled Ocean the Exhibition is about CONCENTRATED PRESENCE rather than individuals on display. The placement of the works, the lack of labelling, the diversity of statements are simply artificial problems for the viewer to actively deal with, like the intrusive sound of the sea. EIAHA OHIPA.

Jim Vivieaere, Guest Curator

I saw this a couple of days before the exhibition, over dinner at the house of one of the participating artists, John Pule, and subsequently wrote these notes (here slightly expanded) on the bottom of the page:

Wording objected to by ACAG staff. According to Jim [they] resort to “practical” explanations for why this could not be circulated—too late—flyer already double-sided—not acceptable to staple a further page to the flyer—not part of his contract to produce a statement—“back-hand privilege” wording particularly problematic. He felt they should take it on precisely to mark a change in their orientation—make it clear one could say this to their face—that they would tolerate it—but their resistance made him all the more keen to retain it. Similarly with Tuffery’s work. ACAG wanted more conventional display—the panels unwrapped—Jim would have let [his friend] Agnes do it [She had been in the Gallery and apparently agreed with ACAG staff that they would be better off displayed. Jim had said something like, “Well, you unwrap them, then,” but she had not wanted to]. “It’s that fickle” he said—parading his own refractoriness—& it being a problem for ACAG staff again made him the more inclined to press the point. Obtained a fax from Michel indicating that Jim could display his work exactly how he liked (i.e. not display it).

I revised Jim’s second sentence to read: “For them to be represented in the gallery is an ambiguous privilege; an affirmation of the Polynesian community, while subjecting them to the gaze of a mainstream European art audience.” With a few other minor changes the statement was, in the end, there in the gallery for people to pick up and take away.

In other ways, the rhetoric of the exhibition became more overt in Auckland, as if to respond to the apparent bewilderment supposedly experienced by Wellington viewers. The flyer with the list of gallery events not only explained that the exhibition explored “‘Pacific Islandness’ in New Zealand” but that the installation design was “intended to distance the works from the viewer and in doing so raise questions about the general visibility of Pacific art.” This was vague. The Auckland dis-



FIGURE 15. Carvings by Iosefa Leo, as exhibited in *Bottled Ocean*, Auckland City Art Gallery, December 1994. (Photo by John McIver, courtesy Auckland City Art Gallery)

play in fact managed—despite Jim’s reservations and intentions—to do justice to the aesthetic power of much of the work while framing it, while making something of a meta-exhibition. Iosefa Leo’s sculptures were for instance mounted on or in the boxes bearing Exhibitour stickers (Figure 15). This was to make the infrastructure of the show’s circulation visible, and to allude to the role exhibitions were playing in the public theater of multicultural affirmations, in the showcasing of mutual ethnic tolerance—or was it repressive tolerance?

In a newspaper interview, Jim made explicit the underlying ambivalence he had spoken to me about much earlier. “The only reason we are

here is that we are Polynesian—not on our merits but because we’re the ‘other.’” As the journalist put it, “Doubts about its appropriateness almost persuaded him to call the whole thing off. He says: ‘We don’t need Polynesian shows. I would like to see it as the last.’” (*New Zealand Herald*, 30 November 1994).

LECTURING ON the show in Wellington had been difficult. I stopped there at the end of a hectic trip that had included a month’s library research in Britain and shorter visits to the United States and Italy. The archival work had led to a series of dead ends; trying to write a paper on contemporary Polynesian cultural politics in the midst of reading eighteenth-century European travel writing, and moving from a European summer to Wellington’s gale-force winter in the space of a few days, were disorienting in many ways. I put hours into a written text that I wasn’t happy with, and ended up speaking less formally from notes. It went down better than I felt it deserved; at least the seats were all taken, which made the City Gallery staff happy.

The main point of the talk was that the curator and artists had seized the opportunity provided by the display case but had wanted to mark, in all kinds of ways, that the vitality of Polynesian culture exceeded that space and was not something that viewers could consume voyeuristically. This seemed apt enough, but as I mentioned I was disappointed by a kind of incommensurability I had registered much earlier, between a sense of the complexity of the happening—the succession of happenings that made up the exhibition, and all the conversations behind it—and the relative poverty or glibness of any statement I could make about it. I was troubled also by the way art commentary enabled the critic to produce exegesis that had its own life, that acquired authority as an account of the meaning of a particular work or exhibition. When I went to Aotearoa New Zealand, my interest was not primarily in producing and disseminating such commentaries myself: I had wanted to discover the commentaries present in other people’s responses.

Though the methodological issues continue to unsettle the larger project, I probably need not have worried about the specific question of whether the meaning I had extracted from *Bottled Ocean*, the caption I had written for it, matched its effect in a wider way. The point that Polynesian culture in New Zealand was mobile and expanding, and was ready to exhibit itself in an exuberant yet complicated, critical, and reflec-



FIGURES 16, 17, AND 18.
Opening party, *Bottled
Ocean*, Auckland City
Art Gallery, December
1994. (From video by
Nicholas Thomas)



FIGURES 19 AND 20.
Contemporary Pacific
fashion, opening
party, *Bottled Ocean*,
Auckland City Art
Gallery, December
1994. (From video by
Nicholas Thomas)

tive way, was demonstrated in direct and compelling terms at the show's Auckland opening in early December 1994. This was a gala event that drew an enormous number of Polynesians. The speeches were there, but so was music and much dancing; Pacific shirts and bright floral lavalavas were everywhere (Figures 16, 17, 18). The gentle ironies of Ani O'Neill's work had been extended to the food: not only were there very good oysters and Pacific dishes such as raw fish in coconut milk, but there were also deplorable sweets in the shape of little bananas and pink-and-white coconut ices. The authentic and the kitsch were, it seemed, part of the same repertoire: one could not have one without acknowledging the other.

The work and the presences of a remarkable cohort of contemporary Polynesian fashion designers epitomized the aspect of contemporary culture that my argument had tried to capture. Their Pacific rap consisted in ripped stockings, hibiscus flowers, leather, islands fabric, tattoos, elaborate face paint, and coconut-shell bras (Figures 19, 20). Having it both ways, the hallmarks of exoticism were reclaimed and embodied, not as objectified spectacle but as seductive practice. The passivity of the exhibit had been succeeded by active exhibitionism.

*

*

*

THIS ARTICLE was written in March 1995. Because it is more of a personal commentary than a standard scholarly article, I have avoided providing references—which could, of course, be very extensive—in such areas as New Zealand cultural politics or the debates about exhibiting culture. The quotation from Michel Tuffery's art teacher, Gregory Flint, appeared in Tim Walker's "Everything Is Connected: The Art of Michel Tuffery," *Art New Zealand* 70:64–67 (1994); the Rasheed Areen interview referred to was in *Art and Asia Pacific* 2:106 (1995); my own paper on the exhibition was "Pacific Dualities: Bottled Ocean in Wellington and Auckland," *Art New Zealand* 75:46–50 (1995); and the general book in which Vivieaere's collage, together with other relevant works, was discussed, is my *Oceanic Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995).

Needless to say, I owe a great deal to the many people associated with *Bottled Ocean* for taking time to discuss the exhibition with me, and I must also thank Mary-Louise Browne, of the City Gallery, Wellington, and Roger Taberner, of the Auckland City Art Gallery, for inviting me to speak in their public programs, and for providing assistance with images. Margaret Jolly provided helpful comments on a draft of the paper; a somewhat different version was read at a conference on Anthropology and the Question of the Other at Rüdeshheim, Germany, in May 1995; I am grateful to Karl-Heinz Kohl and Tullio Maranhão for inviting me to participate. Most of all, of course, I must thank Jim Vivieaere.

Abstract

This essay explores presentation of identity and debates about curatorial practice in a recent touring exhibition of Polynesian art. It emphasizes the fluid nature of the exhibition as a public phenomenon that is aptly captured by the title, *Bottled Ocean*. It notes and reflects on the influence of the author's participation and commentary on some aspects of the exhibition's rhetoric.

KEYWORDS: art, identity, Polynesia